

ABDULLAH HUSSEIN

Sunlight

THE bridge was perched so high across the ravine that the steep climb left him breathless. He halted. The city ended here and the grain fields began, interspersed with stretches of open, uncultivated land. He put his hands on his hips to catch his breath a little and squinted far into the shimmering distance, taking in the gorgeous colors of the bright afternoon. The spring weather was the same as ever.

“It’s March,” he thought, joy stirring in his heart, and strained his memory, “But what day in March was it?”

After a few minutes he gave up. “Oh, well, it’s been twenty years!” he thought, and felt the passage of time in a rush of saliva under his tongue.

He pulled his felt hat lower over his eyes, turned around and looked back. His seven-year-old son was trudging up the steep road, kicking a smooth, round, grey rock as though it were a soccer ball, stopping now and then to catch his breath. The city was behind them, the sun behind the city, and in between lay the fort built by Emperor Akbar splayed out across a hilltop—the tallest object in the panorama, but terribly dreary inside. On either side of the fort the jagged skyline of rooftops and houses built one against the other gave the city the appearance of a massive hill, dark and cone-shaped, stirring with life, silhouetted against a bright sky, dotted here and there with small, low-hanging spring clouds—rough-hewn, bristly round clusters, weighty frozen boulders of fluffed cotton that could spill forth a writhing fury of rain... Oh yes, he knew this peculiar shape of spring cloud very well, as well as he knew the shimmering pale-blue sky of early March that flooded the eyes. Indeed, he had been familiar with them since he was a small child. He had been born here, after all. And although he was returning today after twenty long years, the minute he stepped onto the bridge he knew that the spring weather was exactly as he had known it then.

His son had now caught up with him. He too was looking at the city,

squinting into the sun with his hands resting on his hips.

“Rest awhile,” he said to the boy.

The boy kicked the rock again and walked over to the bridge’s far end. His back to the sun, he peered at the road sloping down the bridge.

“Baba!” the boy abruptly turned back and shouted.

The man removed his hat and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his finger, then lowered his collar, strode over to his son and stood beside him, his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Baba!” the boy said, “the earth is round, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” he replied. He too looked at the precipitous path of the road as it dived down the bridge and smiled. “Everything is round, son. Everything.”

“Everything?”

He started to climb down the slope, his hand still on his son’s shoulder. The sun was behind them now and their shadows crept ahead of them, hugging the road. “Come on!” he cried, “come!” And tapping the boy’s shoulder, he sprinted off. The boy laughed soundlessly and followed his father down the slope at a run. The road was nearly deserted. A single tonga-carriage, crammed full of peasants, sped down it some distance away. The early morning chill still hung in the air, and the leaves felled by the winter frost scudded along on both sides of the road. As he jogged along he noticed a single thread of spiderweb dangling inches away from his eyes. He quickly ducked, stepping out of its path. When they reached level ground again, the older man stopped abruptly. The boy, still running, bumped into him and was thrown off balance, but he quickly grabbed his father’s arm and swung from it. They stood for a while laughing and catching their breath. He threw his arms around the boy’s shoulders and led him off the paved country road to the fields running along one side of it.

“Have you seen a razor’s edge, son?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Can you describe it for me?”

“It’s very sharp.”

“And round.”

“Round?”

“Yes, if you look at it under a big microscope.”

“A big microscope?”

The imprecise use of the word “big” was jarring; all the same, he found it rather amusing. “I mean,” he corrected himself, “under a powerful microscope.”

The boy knew his father was pulling his leg and broke into uncertain laughter. Again he grabbed the man's arm and swung from it.

They were now walking on a narrow trail that cut through acre after lush acre of wheat fields. The dark green stalks came up to their knees. Their uniform height was proof that a rich soil had nourished them and that each seed-bearing clump of dirt had received plentiful, uniform watering. A profusion of supple wheat ears, gold-green and long-whiskered, was arrayed in neat lines and bent into the wind, reminiscent of rows of genuflecting worshipers at Eid prayers.

(Whenever the season changed—he recalled—whenever the sun grew warmer and brighter and the roots of the wheat slowly turned a bright gold, the warm winds wafted in from God knows where and swept over the entire landscape like a spell, holding all creation, animate and inanimate, captive in their magical golden warmth. How they fired the sluggish blood in the veins and made it leap to the soundless melody that stirred the nameless emotions belonging, unmistakably, to the change of season, which made one neither sad nor happy, but only gave one the sensation of being reborn, renewed. It was in just this season, he remembered, when as a seven-year-old he roamed with his father looking for game, his first BB-gun slung across his shoulder. His father would pluck off an ear of wheat, turn it upside down and quietly stick it inside the boy's trouser leg. The more he tried to pull the bristly thing out, the more it crawled up his trousers, while his father, feigning concern, asked, "What's the matter? Are you all right, son?" He would poke and prod and look him over, but do nothing to help his son dislodge the intruding bristle; instead, he just stood there snickering. Exasperated, the boy would lay his gun down on the trail and try with both his hands to somehow expel the source of his misery, but the wheat spike just hopped further up, like a bird. Although later, much later, on growing up, he at last solved the mystery of the spear's upward locomotion, the knowledge did nothing to alter the image of the spear which his mind—or the part of it that is aware of the unknown, the truer than the true—had preserved in the shape of a bird or a grasshopper.)

He stretched out his arm and plucked an ear of wheat, stuck the bristly whiskers between his teeth and looked back stealthily from the corner of his eye. His son was coming along behind him on the narrow trail, taking each step with extreme caution, his hands shoved into his shorts pockets.

"History, too, is round—I mean circular," he said.

"How?"

“It repeats itself.”

“How does it repeat itself?”

“Well,” he began, chewing on the wheat beard with his front teeth, “it’s like this: truly massive armies span out; they overrun country after country, allowing every single soldier to prove himself as a gallant conqueror, his glories told in story and song. Precisely at this point, decline sets in. You know why? Because the vanquished is weak, and in weakness there is power. In the end the vanquished brings the victor down, by epic and panegyric, by feeding his ego, by pandering to his innate greed for domination. It just takes a little bit longer. That’s the only difference. The victor finds out when it’s too late, after he is lost beyond all hope of recovery. This is how history repeats itself. It is round—like any other thing that goes in circles, for instance, the moon, the sun, the stars, the earth, the sky, trees, plants, blood ...”

“Blood?” the boy asked, confused.

“Very much so,” he replied. “It circles in the body from the roots of one’s hair down to one’s toenails, and then back up, and down again, interminably, round and round and round ...” he laughed.

The boy didn’t. He was taking a serious interest in all this. “Baba,” he said, “are people round too?”

That caught him off guard. Logic required that this should be the next question, didn’t it? But like most people, he suffered from the illogical proclivity of the mind to shut out awareness of what is right before it. The question stunned him.

“Oh, yes,” he managed. “Morning and evening, humans go through the same routine. Caught up in the same rut of habit, we move in the same circle, interminably, endlessly, and are therefore round.”

The boy laughed uncertainly.

“True brilliance,” the father concluded, “is to somehow break free of this rut.”

They were passing through a field where sugarcane had been harvested sometime in early February. The weak, white soil had cracked and clotted into a bumpy terrain where dried cane roots jutted up menacingly. Minute, earth-colored insects and worms crawled through the bare roots, and yellowed pieces of sugarcane peel skittered and rustled in the warm gusts of wind. A line of rust-colored birds zoomed past above their heads.

“They should have plowed the field by now,” he said.

“So why haven’t they?” the boy asked.

“You see, if you leave them long enough the sugarcane roots sprout a

second time,” the man explained, “but don’t yield half as much as the first time. Farmers who are lazy lie back and content themselves with that.”

“Baba, farmers don’t shirk at what they do,” the boy said.

“Whoever said that? They are no different from anyone, son,” he said. “And so they are round too.”

The boy laughed uncertainly again and sprinted off, leaving his father far behind on the trail. As the father watched, the boy’s momentum carried him a few steps into the freshly-plowed field ahead, and his feet, shoes and all, suddenly sank into the soft, crumbly dirt. This brought him back to the time when he had been a little boy who loved to frisk barefoot in a freshly-plowed field, his feet sinking up to his ankles as though inhaled into the cottony-soft earth, the peculiar moist dirt beneath the soles of his feet, at once cool and warm, producing a sensation quite out of this world. He broke his stride, squinted his eyes and looked over the shimmering surface of the field, inhaling the ancient, familiar smell wafting from its powerful, satiated black soil. His nostrils began to quiver.

“The farmer of this field is definitely hard-working,” he concluded.

“Baba, is he round too?” the boy asked, a mischievous glint playing in his eyes.

“You rascal!” he shouted and ran after the boy to grab him.

Running one behind the other on narrow trails and laughing now and then, father and son passed many fields. The boy, much faster and lighter of tread, was running ahead as easily and swiftly as a hare, while his father stumbled numerous times off the trail into the fields, some wet, some dry, and his shoes became covered with mud and dirt. Whenever the trail ended in a T-intersection, the boy stopped, momentarily unable to decide which way to turn. Then he would look back and, finding his father quickly catching up to him, blindly turn left or right and take off again. But within that brief instant of indecision the older man would close the gap some more.

The two now chased each other along a relatively wide and straight trail through wheat fields being watered perhaps for the last time before harvesting. Scared by the sound of their footfalls, a couple of hares and a wild cat suddenly appeared out of the crop on one side of the path, jumped in front of them clear across the trail and disappeared into the crop on the other side. A flock of tiny ash-colored birds took flight from a field nearby, skimming low over the wheat stalks. A gust of wind teased the wheat spikes on one side of the trail, brushed his face, ruffling his hair and making his blood jump in his veins, and disappeared into the spikes

on the other side. He was now only a step behind his son. A strong desire to stretch out his arms and grab his son's soft, warm, vibrant body overwhelmed him. But just as he proceeded to attempt it, the trail abruptly came to a dead end. A well stood in the way. He stopped short.

The same trail!—he marveled, as his mind returned to a fond memory—why, even the same season! He was a seven-year-old boy running ahead of his own father when the trail had come to an end just as suddenly and, unable to control himself, he had jumped clear across the ditch that irrigated the fields. His father, who was unnerved by the very idea of a jump of any sort, no matter how short or small, had stopped dead in his tracks and started to fumble in the air, as if straining to retrieve a precious object. The same fields, the same crops, the same water running in the ditch, the same fresh, warm breeze that rustled sweetly through the green-gold profusion of wheat stalks, the same flock of tiny ash-colored birds floating only inches above the wheat spikes as father and son chased after each other with a passion—father and son and earth! How events had a way of coming full circle! And with an economy, discipline, and clockwork precision that were truly mind-boggling! He was amazed.

He bent his knees and sat down at the water's edge, then thrust his hand into the clear running stream and peered into it, feeling in his fingertips the simultaneous warmth and coolness he had experienced, at seven years old, as a uniquely mysterious attribute of deep earth, running water and the human body. He smelled the nameless fragrance of the moist, cool dirt and the half-ripe wheat crop. The familiar smell was indeed still there. Now, at thirty-five, he was discovering the awesome and timeless magic of life that ran in circles, and thought: water changes into blood and is transmitted through the earth from one generation to the next, from father to son. From father to son!

As he gazed at his own fine hand floating before him on the water, he recalled that back then an astrologer used to sit behind the well, where the interrupted trail picked up again, with odd-shaped coins and small brass cubes with numbers etched on them strewn on a rag spread out in front of him. He pulled his hand from the stream, ran it over his face, then wiped it dry on his hair and stood up. The well droned on dreamily, worked by a pair of oxen. His son had meanwhile jumped up and perched on the shaft and was tugging at the tail of one of the blinkered animals. In a grove of *jaman* and mulberry trees to the right stood the farmer's mud house, and in front of it the farmer was busily cutting fodder with his chopper. A water buffalo stood tethered to the manger by the mud wall. A pesky crow, perched on the animal's back, was pecking at

it relentlessly. He took in the tranquil, shaded scene for a while and then strolled over to the back of the well. The place where the astrologer used to sit was empty.

The sounds of the squeaky well, the running water and the chopper, and the putrid odor of leaves left to rot in the shady spots, assailed him from behind; the shimmering spring colors and sweet rustle of wheat spikes, gently swaying in their lush profusion, flooded his senses from in front. Why, of all places, he wondered, had the astrologer picked out this particular spot? The only people who ever came along this trail were peasants, and as far as he could remember, he had never seen a single peasant visit the old astrologer. Why? One of those mysteries, he thought, that inhabited the landscape of childhood. Stranger still, as long as the astrologer occupied that spot, an aura of supreme contentment and serenity enveloped him. An antique black chest always sat next to him with a few crumbling old books piled on top of it; leaning against them was a rectangular piece of cardboard bearing the image of a human hand, the palm showing a network of crudely-drawn lines, and at the bottom were the boldly inscribed words: JOTISH [SPELLS], RAMAL [GEOMANCY] NUJUM [ASTROLOGY], ABJAD.

“Abjad?” he had asked his father on day. “What does Abjad mean?”

And his father knew about the Abjad, just as he knew about everything else. His father, who wore a long, drooping, affectionate mustache and was an expert in practically all the sciences, had replied, “It is the science of names, son.”

“Names?”

“Yes, names.”

“How so, Baba?”

“A man’s name profoundly affects his life. The science that studies those effects is called Abjad.”

“How does a name affect one’s life?” he asked.

His father sat down comfortably on the trail and placed his shotgun in his lap. Then he had his son sit beside him and answered, “All this is part of the science of words. And words, son, are full of magic.”

“Magic?”

“Oh, yes.”

“How?”

“It’s like this,” his father began, snipping off an ear of wheat, which he then put in his mouth and began to chew. “Let’s take your name as an example. Morning, noon, and night, your mother and your sister, your teachers and your classmates call you by that name hundreds of times,

and you respond to them. Certainly that is one function, but not the only function of a name. It doesn't stop there. Every time your name is called out, it changes into a word—it even assumes a palpable shape, which is then released into the air by the speaker's mouth. And you may think it just peters out then, but actually it never does. Why? Well, because it is a living thing. It shoots back to your star, because they're connected together. Whenever it's called out, it takes off with sonic speed and heads automatically"—Father was rather fond of using this word, he recalled and laughed—"for your star, and bang! It collides with it. Every single time! And that's how it comes to have influence over your life."

"Star—what do you mean, Baba?"

"Each of us has a star under which we're born, we live and we die."

They got up from the trail and started off again, one behind the other. When his father interrupted the discussion a little later to say, "Well, it's about time you read the biography of Napoleon," the image of the fat, three-columned foxed tome with small type, its red binding faded by time and much use, arose ineluctably before his eyes. The volume used to lie on a small, low table by his father's chair, and the older man would pick it up now and then to read or scribble something in the margins. As the boy thought of the book—which always exuded the peculiar strong odor of aging paper, a smell he knew as well as, say, the smell of his shoes or his bed—he blurted out without thinking, "You know what, Baba? When I grow up, I'll become a writer." His innocent declaration prompted the strangest reaction in the older man: his eyes dilated and he looked at his son almost with sadness. He sat down on the trail once again, put the shotgun in his lap, sat his son down at his side and then said, "Words are full of magic, son, but it is hard to use them properly."

"Hard—why, Baba?"

"I'll tell you why." His father's eyes narrowed as he looked up into the sky. "Writing words is as hard as clouds ..."

"Clouds?"

"Yes. You see these clouds: for the past hour or so they have stood in the sky like solid rock sculptures of fluffed, freshly-laundered cotton—even ironed, you could say, perfectly still and unchanging. Right?"

"I guess so."

"You also see how every single jutting point, each curve, indeed every single line is so sharp it seems to have been carved out of granite. Don't you agree?"

"Absolutely, Baba."

“And yet despite their clarity and silence they are packed with such fury and violence, vitality and power that they become indelibly etched on the mind, so that if you have seen them once you are not likely to forget them for years and years.” The older man’s eyes suddenly lit up with an immense flash. “You see that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Baba, I do.”

“But—” The brightness died out of his eyes as suddenly as it had come. He broke off another wheat spear, sniffed it sadly, and said, “These clouds come only once a year ... in spring, for a few days only, just a few days. The rest of the year it is the same old clouds—dirty, mud-colored, fuzzy, drab as a cobweb. They drift in, rant and roar, and kill ...” he tossed the spike into the field and abruptly stood up, “the wonderful colors of the sunlight.”

They started down the dirt trail again in single file. He understood very little of the import of his father’s impassioned discourse, and didn’t especially care. Soon he let it seep out of his mind. He hadn’t been serious about becoming a writer anyway. He had burst out with the words spontaneously, without forethought. Much later, as a grown man, when he did try to write books, the essence of what his father had tried to communicate falteringly that afternoon had suddenly become absolutely clear. Whenever he was struck by the magic of a thought and tried to capture it in words, the magic faded away. He would look with mounting displeasure at the words he had scribbled—a disgusting pile of dead worms which could scarcely stir anyone—and then lapse into a daze. He looked up in the sky for the spring clouds, but they were still some time away; he wondered how his father, the man who had never in his life written a book, happened to know all those things. How could he?

Those clouds never returned. And neither did he find the exact word he was seeking. The impeccable word—honed of steel, crisp, precise, and powerful, which breathed if you looked at it and throbbed like a heart with a life of its own if you uttered it—kept him enthralled with its silent magic but never emerged from the confines of his mind. He always knew that words possessed magical power, but how impossibly difficult it was to write them he had learned only now. Yet write he did, strewing enormous quantities of squiggly worms, and even achieved a measure of fame, but in the end he failed like every other writer, even the greats.

“Baba!” The boy threw his arms around the man’s legs and asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m thinking, son.”

“What?”

“What am I thinking?” he squinted into the air above the field, straining his memory. “Nothing in particular,” he said.

“Nothing?”

He abruptly plumped down on the ground and invited the boy to do the same. He picked up a dry, broken stick and drew a circle with it in the soil of the freshly-plowed field. “Let me draw it for you,” he said. “This circle, here, represents the human being’s basic attitude. All our thoughts fall within it. The world outside the circle is the realm of the unknown, the dark.” He made two marks close together on the circumference. “This tiny slice between the marks represents the area of pure goodness. And this,” he guided the stick along the rim to the right of the slice, “is where the domain of iniquity begins, and here,” he moved the stick to the left of the slice this time, “begins negative goodness. The lines separating the three areas are very fine, indeed they are almost invisible. Even from up close, you’ll have a hard time telling the three apart; they appear to be seamless. And yet they share one thing in common: people’s basic attitude. Whether we try to do pure good, evil, or something on the spectrum of iniquity, the basic human attitude remains inevitably aggressive. Now then, even when we appear to be thinking, we are scarcely thinking anything at all.”

“Anything at all?”

“That’s right. Unless this basic attitude changes, there is little hope of breaking out of this circle, and unless that happens, we cannot reach out to the vast unknown that lies outside the circle. And I mean truly vast, so vast that, by comparison, this circle is no more than a mere speck. True knowledge resides outside the circle, in the realm of the unknown. Understand?”

The boy laughed, unsure of himself.

The man threw the stick away and got up. Again he wrapped his arms lovingly around his son’s neck, and the two turned back toward the city. He knew the boy had scarcely understood a word. All the same, the thought that someday, somewhere, his son would find himself face to face with these truths and would then understand everything and remember him, brought a smile of deep satisfaction to his lips.

On the return trek they took different trails that eventually led back to the same point where they had abandoned the highway for a stroll through the fields. The boy had broken free of his father’s clasping arms and was now running ahead of him picking wild spring flowers. Along both edges of the trail a linseed field unfurled its dizzying profusion of screaming red flowers, broken by the occasional violet-streaked tulip

rearing its hesitant head. There was also a wild rose bush. As the unsuspecting boy tried to pick a rose, a thorn pricked his finger and a drop of blood, shining brilliantly in the sun, oozed from the pierced skin. The boy let out a mild cry and quickly sucked up the blood. The older man rushed to the boy, examined the finger and advised him to keep sucking. He carefully removed the rose from the bush and offered it to the boy, who added it to his bouquet and started off again. The father, trailing behind the son, lifted his right hand to his nose and sniffed the fingers. Doesn't smell like a rose at all, he concluded. He remembered his own father, who had remained all his life something of a black sheep in the family, because he pursued the carefree life of an idler with a passion, and without a care squandered stupendous sums on the rather expensive hobby of hunting. He had often heard his own mother complain about his irresponsibility and shiftless ways. All he had ever cared to do was to live life as fully as possible and contemplate its mysteries. He did as he damned well pleased and loved as he thought best. In the end, perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing.

As he stood by the rose bush watching his son dart here and there collecting wildflowers, an irresistible thought occurred to him: To be grateful to them, sons don't need their fathers' wealth, respectability and social position, perhaps not even their achievements. A certain fragrance is enough, a fragrance left on the fingers by the merest touch of a perfect rose. A scent left so subtly one is scarcely aware of it, but which later, quite by accident, when the hand passes by the face, wafts to his nostrils. One is pleasantly surprised, searches for it everywhere on the body, only to locate it, finally, in the pores of one's fingers. And then, remembering that somewhere in the past he too had come upon a rose, the son feels infinitely thankful.

The boy stopped, seeing his father still standing behind on the trail. "Baba!" he called and raised his fingers to his nose involuntarily, and when the older man had caught up to him, asked, "Baba, what were you doing there?"

"I was thinking, son."

"What were you thinking?" the boy asked, and with a mischievous glint in his eyes, sprinted off.

Before chasing after his son down the trail, he let forth a deep and throaty sound of happiness, something like the resounding bellow of an ox. They passed through many fields, running now at a fast clip, now slowly. The present trail cut through numerous wheat and chick-pea fields, and in one of them a bunch of village urchins was roasting a stalk

of tender green chick-peas still in the pods. The warm, delicious smell of roasting pods rose into the air. The man broke his stride and halted on the trail for a while to observe, with mingled joy and sadness, the burning, crackling chick-pea plants, the billowing smoke, and the band of eager-faced boys sitting on their toes peering into the fire. Meanwhile his son, too, had stopped and was looking at the boys, his hands on his hips. Soon he scampered off again.

They came upon many patches of wildland as well as fields, some cultivated, others fallow. The rising spring breeze caressed their faces and moved gently on. Finally they abandoned the fields for the open road. For a while they stood side by side, alternately gasping and laughing, then the boy drew back a little and punched the man's thigh with all his might a few times before wrapping himself around his legs.

The sun had started to climb down. The country road, shimmering in its radiant heat, was nearly deserted, except for a few peasants and their womenfolk returning from the town market. The men carried bundles tied to sticks slung across their shoulders; the women, slippers in hand, balanced big earthen pots stacked high on their heads as their small caravan moved rhythmically along the edge of the road and down the sloping bridge.

The man once again curved his arm around his son's shoulder and began climbing slowly up the steep slope. Coming to the bridge, he stopped. The city, his city, stood straight ahead, bathed by the sun which shone directly above it. Once again he planted his hands on his hips, as if to catch his breath, and turned around to look one last time deep and far into the brilliant, crisp colors of the spring afternoon. The emerald green of wheat and chick-pea, the flaming red of linseed, the deep yellow of the scentless wildflowers, the almond brown of freshly-plowed fields, the darkish green of fruit trees, the azure sky, the shimmering white spring clouds—one by one and then all together, the riotous feast of colors assembled in his eyes. He stood immobile, gazed at length at the strange landscape before him, and remembered the man he had seen die. In the instant before death, how his drained face had flushed with a sudden return of color, his eyes gleaming with an unusual brilliance. In those brief moments before his body turned cold, how incredibly healthy he had looked ... and how handsome! He shaded his eyes with his hand and concentrated on the scene until his eyes had absorbed it entirely. And then he proceeded to cross the bridge.

Like some migratory bird, he had alighted in this city early this morning. In the first light—when the bazaars and narrow lanes were still empty, except for a few devout worshipers returning after the dawn prayer or some strollers out to take air, walking along as they quietly brushed their teeth with acacia twigs—he had stood at the door of his ancestral house, looking at it with the diffidence of a stranger, his son in tow, his suitcase dangling from his hand. The city sweepers, their backs eternally bent, went about their business sweeping the bazaars and cleaning the open sewers that flowed in the narrow lanes. A milkman rushed along bearing two large containers, swaying under their weight. A beggar cried for alms in his loud, dreamlike voice. He gently dropped the suitcase on the small brick platform in front of the door and waited awhile, taking in the old familiar sounds. Twenty years had passed, but these sounds, the first sounds of the day, were still the same. As a young boy he would squirm in his bed when they woke him up each morning. Or perhaps it was the other way around: he heard them only after his sleep had already broken. As he stood before the door with his head drooping, he experienced again briefly that pleasing though oddly unreal state of drowsiness in which the acts of sleeping, waking and hearing all merged indistinguishably. Nowhere, not in any other bed or bedroom, could he recall experiencing that state after he had left here. He raised his hand and gently rapped at the door—once, twice, and a third time, while his son, stupefied by it all, just gawked at the tall houses around him. Two pigeons huddled under the eaves of a house suddenly took flight against the dim sky. The window of a top-floor room opened.

“Who is it?” a girl’s head poked out of the window, her voice groggy.

“It’s me,” the man answered dumbly, raising his head.

The girl’s face disappeared behind the closing window. He looked around him nervously. There was the sound of feet descending a staircase, and shortly thereafter the door was flung open. “Uncle!” the girl whispered, holding her breath.

He looked at the girl, scrutinizing her whole body, tall and slim and young, and realized the ineluctable passage of time. He put the suitcase down inside the entranceway and hugged the young stranger. The muffled sound of a door opening and then closing came from the upper floor. He stepped onto the staircase. One look at the stone stairs and the color of walls, scarcely changed or even aged, seemed to transport him back twenty years into the world of his childhood. As he climbed the stairs slowly with his head bent low, a strange feeling overcame him, a feeling of familiarity and foreignness, the lot of every exile returning home after a

long absence. It was something that is not just the perceptions of the eye and ear, but is sensed all over the skin and vibrates beneath it in the rhythms of blood, making the body break out in goose bumps and time stand still.

He looked up. At the top of the stairs, leaning against the ledge, his sister stood waiting for him. More than half her hair had turned grey, the skin of her face was loose and flaccid, and her large, gaping eyes bore the emptiness found only in the eyes of suffering women. He stopped a few steps from where she was standing and just stared at her quietly in the gathering daylight. She was only five years older than he. Graceful, tall, slim, vibrant with the nervous energy of first youth when he had left. For the second time, the flight of years gave him a rude jolt.

“Saeed—” her weak, quivering voice rose, and he didn’t know when he moved, clambered up the remaining steps, came close to her and hugged her madly like a child, his heart drained of blood at the feel of a skeleton underneath her baggy clothing. He was only aware of holding against him a bag of bones, rocking perilously with each escaping breath, and of a smell as ancient, familiar and pleasing as the dreamy, half-asleep, half-awake inarticulate noises of first light, a smell that wafted from suckling babies and from sisters with whom one has cuddled and played in childhood. Raising his head for a moment, with no particular thought in mind, he saw his son and the tall, slim girl looking at him and his sister in wide-eyed worry, and a pair of golden pigeons cavorting joyously across the patch of sky visible above the corner of the courtyard. Thus without any great desire for the awareness, he realized that the sun had risen and the heart was but a scrap of wet rag being mercilessly wrung out. In another sense he had realized nothing, for time had lost itself in two bodies long exiled from each other, but of identical color and smell.

Later he found himself eating breakfast in the big room, listening to his sister, who sat opposite him with his son in her lap. “I got your letter,” she was saying, while he ran his eyes over every detail in the room between sips of tea. Out of all the furnishings he recognized only the massive walnut chest that stood in a corner. Everything else looked totally unfamiliar. The day the gigantic chest had been hauled into the house was still vivid in his memory. It was so large and unwieldy that it had gotten stuck midway up the narrow staircase. His father, towering at the top of the stairs like some decorated general on the battlefield, rained a barrage of instructions on the eight laborers who now pushed, now pulled the piece with all their strength, sweating profusely from the effort. He had just returned from school, a bit late, and was famished; he wanted to

rush up to the upper floor. But there it was, stuck midway, unbudging, affording not the slightest space to crawl through as the eight stout, hardy men—in threadbare loincloths, their throbbing, wet muscles glistening in the half-light, their bodies reeking the strong odor of labor and poverty—fumbled dumbly with the improbably heavy piece, four in front and four in back, his father’s angry, crisp voice cracking like a whip above them. He smiled vaguely. The wooden chest, whose dark, wavy grain showed through the varnish on the surface, was used for many years to store an assortment of damask, cotton carpets and lightweight comforters, while its lowest drawer housed the extra bed-posts and an old broken banjo. Whenever it was opened, a gust of its odor filled the air, the mingled smell of walnut and raw jute, wholly unlike any other odor in the world outside the chest.

As he took the last sip of tea, he felt an overwhelming rush of desire to walk over to the chest and open it to see what kinds of things were stored in it and what kind of smell burst forth from it now.

“You didn’t bring your wife along?” his sister was asking him, and he rambled on in answer. He was scarcely aware of the words spilling out of his mouth. His age seemed to have coiled back into his senses of smell, hearing, and sight, and his eyes sought his sister in the form of the delicate, trim, tall girl who was now moving about in the room that had been his for many long years, bending over to stare at him and his son with a look that bespoke closeness and distance in equal measure.

One of the walls of his room, made entirely of wood, separated off the bathroom. It shook violently whenever one tapped it. In a recess in another wall stood a wardrobe with a mirror. The mirror was so tall that one could see one’s whole body in it. One of the upper shelves inside the wardrobe was always occupied by a copy of the Holy Qur’an, and one of the lower ones by a broken rosary belonging to someone—God knew whom. The third wall had two windows that opened into the alleyway. The windows used to be covered with a delicate mesh through which the slow, sleepy noises of first light filtered in. Once, very early, before daybreak, guests had arrived in the house opposite, which sent their little boy scampering out in the alleyway, singing away jubilantly “*Dilwale...*” He had heard that film snatch dimly through his sleep; he had slowly awakened to it and found himself repeating it over and over again until the sound condensed into a body and acquired a color—a rich golden color that had lost none of its brilliance even after the inexorable passage of time. And it was thus that he discovered that if the past had a color, it had to be a dazzling gold.

A violent desire arose in him to overturn the breakfast tray, dash off to his room, and peek in through the door to see what it looked like now and what sort of things it contained.

“You were wild in the head, Saeed,” his sister was saying wistfully. “You take after our father so much.”

He got up. Large framed photographs of his long-dead parents, their smiles etched eternally on their faces, adorned the mantel above the fireplace. He also recognized his sister’s husband, whom he had never met and probably never would. What could he have said to her—what? He yawned and quietly walked over to the bed and stretched out on it. Minutes later he was fast asleep, his feet still in his shoes.

When he got up, the shoes were lying neatly beside the bed and all the doors were closed. He could hear the faint shuffle of tiptoeing feet—his sister, his niece, and the maid, outside on the porch and in the kitchen—and the cackling laughter of his son rising above it.

After lunch he took leave of his sister for a couple of hours and went out with his son. On the way to the bazaar they came across four men who peered at them closely and then quietly moved along. Finding himself a stranger in a once familiar setting, he was gripped by embarrassment as he entered the bazaar. Hurriedly he raised his collar, pulled his felt hat quite low over his eyes, and with hands jammed in his pants pockets walked the entire length of the bazaar, indeed the whole city, as invisibly as though he were wearing King Solomon’s magic cap. No one recognized him. This made him feel strangely sad and at the same time quite relieved. Returning now from his long, afternoon stroll through the fields, before reentering the city he once again lowered his hat, raised his jacket collar, and began his climb down the bridge with hands stuffed into his pockets.

Shielded by his newly-acquired anonymity he covered half the city’s length along the Circular Road before finally entering the bazaar. The dust kicked up by horse-driven carriages and automobiles had settled on his hat and shoulders and was glinting in the last of the sun. Clouds had begun to gather around the sun. In the bazaar he recognized Rahim, who sold sweet iced drinks. He sported a dazzling white beard now. He was perched on his seat in the same old way, fanning away the pesky flies that buzzed incessantly above an assortment of bottles of homemade syrups, each a different color. Once, at this very spot, Rahim had single-handedly taken on a band of seven robbers. But that was a different time, when

Rahim used to wear a fine muslin shirt which generously revealed the firm grace of his form, his gently-sloping shoulder blades, and his taut muscular arms. Now, though, the face buried in the thick white beard was recognizable only with the greatest difficulty.

He also recognized a number of other shopkeepers who sat behind the counter, each in his own timeless way. A few pedestrians probed and prodded him with inquisitive eyes and moved on, then turned to look back at him again, as if straining to place him by his gait, to remember something—but in vain. Twenty years is a long time, long enough to change childhood into youth, youth into old age, and to blur the memory. Instead of returning straight home, he turned into a lane on the right.

The lane, lumpily paved with bricks, embodied the whole of his care-free past, bearing traces of numberless ancient footfalls left strangely unaffected by time. The narrow street was almost empty at this hour; he took heart, pulled his hat up over his eyes and ran his fingers through his son's hair. The rising and falling hum of the bazaar was receding now, giving way to the noises peculiar to the lane: the languorous, hushed voices of women as they sat behind their porch windows chatting across the lane, cooking vegetables and peering at the passersby; the suggestive squeak of a door opening behind them somewhere in the house, then closing; the mysterious, rhythmic sound of bodies meeting in the act of love in the cool comfort of darkened rooms, or simply lying at rest; the droning stillness of the afternoon.

He felt a powerful urge to spread out his arms and run down the lane making wild noises as he used to long ago, as a little boy, but the lingering feeling of estrangement quenched it; instead, he curved an arm around his son's shoulder and strode on through the lane with the stiff, purposeful gait of a middle-aged man or a pilgrim, yet supremely attentive not to disturb the patterns left on the brick path by his youthful feet in an ancient time. The women craned their necks to look at the pair, then their thoughts drifted off to other things. And countless men and women, inaudibly mumbling in their sleep after their love-making in the dark coolness of their rooms, didn't even notice the two.

This house, there, was where his friend Om lived; his sister, Pushpa, used to tie a *rakhi*, a piece of silk thread, around his wrist every year. Where might they be now? he wondered. Back then they all went to the same primary school and at least twice a week Pushpa would say to him, "You know what? We've cooked a vegetable dish today." Without further thought he would walk over to their house with them. They would settle

down in the cool outer hall and eat puffy, round, paper-light *chapatis* with a vegetables dish served in tiny, glittering brass bowls. Later, they would play on the steps of Pushpa and Om's porch, and no one in his family would worry as to his whereabouts. For in those days he had not just one house but two, his own, of course, and this other belonging to Pushpa and Om.

He broke his stride and peeked through the open door of the house: the outer hall, the courtyard, the storeroom, the staircase on the right—everything was the same, except a different family lived here now. The grey-haired old woman who sat in the outer hall working the spinning-wheel lifted her dull eyes to look at him.

“What do you want, brother?” she said.

His eyes played over the beams supporting the hall ceiling.

“Who are you looking for, brother?” the old woman asked again.

“No one, Bibi,” he said in a low voice. His eyes fell upon the heap of cotton lying next to the old woman, and he wondered whether it came from this year's harvest. He ran his fingers through his son's hair once more and started off again.

The house exuded a strange, cool smell, he recalled, which also emanated from the bodies of Om and Pushpa. On waking up from an afternoon nap, his eyes still closed, it was this smell that told him that he had been sleeping in their house. He would open his eyes, catch the glitter of brass pots and pans on the walls of the dark room, and sit up. Today, without that familiar smell, this house which as a child he had considered his own, had become a perfect stranger, he thought. Everything else was the same; only that smell had vanished—a smell which had no fixed domicile yet possessed a body, passed easily from place to place, and also succumbed to death.

He was now passing by his old school. The good thing about the school was that it was located right in the neighborhood and all the children went to it. This was the back of the school building, whose gate and several windows were crossed by horizontal iron bars, just like the doors of prisons and strongholds for treasure. The main gate faced the Circular Road. He removed his hand from his son's shoulder, walked over to the gate, and grabbing the iron bars, pressed his face against them like a prisoner and peered inside. The school had ended a short while before and the janitors were closing up the classrooms. A few teachers stood leaning on their bikes on the verandah, chatting. The classroom directly across from him was for the fourth graders. He peered into it from behind the bars. He could see a chaotic jumble of desks smudged

with ink stains, and on the blackboard was a division problem, solved but half-erased. A framed picture of Allama Iqbal hung skewed on the wall facing him. It was the fourth-grade classroom, he repeated in his heart, where he had spent a whole year. He remembered how the boy who used to sit next to him reeked like old ink-rags, and the boy next to that one always gave off an odor of the moist clay used on writing tablets and the dry, crisp smell of freshly-sharpened reed pens, which he found infinitely pleasing. His true friendship, though, was only with Om and Pushpa, who sat in the second row, along with their own friends. During the lunch break they would all scramble to the tap to apply a thick emulsion of clay over their writing tablets. Whenever one of them, while smoothing the freshly applied clay with the hand, left their clod of clay unattended, another would stealthily pick it up, quickly rub it on their own tablet, and return it to its place quite as stealthily, and in the confusion no one was the wiser.

He pulled back his face and gently rubbed his forehead where the iron bars had left their impression. Once again he ruffled his son's hair and laughed slowly. The two started off again.

Now, the house that stood next to the school held a great mystery for him. One look at it instantly brought to mind the man who had lived here, a tall, trim man of 45, maybe 50, who always appeared clad in the outfit of the Khaksars, his pockets constantly stuffed with Urdu newspapers and magazines. He owned a bicycle, from which dangled an odd assortment of old eyeglasses. Ostensibly, he sold them, but nobody had ever actually seen him make a sale. All he would do was stop every few steps as he dragged his bicycle along in the bazaar, emit a deep, throaty cry: "Chor uchakka chaudhri aur ghundi ran pardhan!" ["Pickpockets and robbers for dignitaries! Common whores as honored matrons!"] and then eye the space around him with an air of childlike innocence and triumph. The shopkeepers would look back at him tenderly, then laugh in embarrassment as if they were somehow implicated in the cry, even if they were not its target. After shouting his slogan, the man, too, would laugh lightheartedly and be on his way. His tone of voice and his face reflected no bitterness, only good cheer and a trace of harmless sarcasm. And his words were quite incongruous with his appearance and gait. He looked like everybody's friend, though no one had ever seen him stop for an amiable chat with anyone. Every morning, after he and his friends had reached school, they would see the man emerge from the house with his bicycle and fix a padlock on the door. As they stood there and watched, he would step into the street, raise, without fail, his deep and throaty cry,

“Chor uchakka chaudhri aur ghundi ran pardhan!”, dart his innocent, triumphant gaze over the faces of the schoolchildren gathered in the lane, and walk off toward the city.

No one even knew the day the man had died. For three entire days his door remained latched from inside, he recalled, until the stench spilled out and hung over everything in the air. The schoolteachers were the first to rush to the door. They pounded on it steadily. A few children who had scrambled to the scene, drawn by all the noise, told them they hadn't seen the man come out of the house at all in the last three days. Neighbors gathered, the police arrived. They pounded on the door, called out his name, even tried to peek in through the cracks, and finally decided to break in. Inside, the man was found sitting in a chair, as casually as one sits at a meal, only his hand had slid off to one side. A scrap of paper and a writing pen lay in front of him on the table, with, he would find out much later, *“Chor uchakka chaudhri aur ghundi ran pardhan!”* scribbled on the paper.

Through the legs of the grownups bursting into the room he had only had time to catch a glimpse of the man and then a burst of stench hit him and sent him reeling outside vomiting into the open gutter. That day Pushpa told him not once but twice that vegetables had been prepared at her house again, but he scarcely heard her and returned home straight away. For the next few days he was unable to hold any food or drink.

He quickly turned and stepped into the street where, at the very end, his parental house was found. Women ensconced behind their doorways or windows for an afternoon chat eyed him with interest, which made him feel self-conscious. Nervously he pulled up his collar, dropped his hat low over his forehead, jammed his hands into his coat pockets and walked on with his eyes fixed straight in front of him. Inside his pocket, his fingers counted out the change: five annas and three pies—his entire capital!

The clouds had now covered the sun completely, and a moist wind, bearing news of the coming rain, had started to blow. By the time he reached the door of his house, the first drops had already plopped down on his hat.

His son rushed to the stairs ahead of him, thumping up them. Raindrops fell, rapid and noisy, on the window eaves, and as they absorbed the moisture, the parched walls released a warm, soothing fragrance identified with raw earth. A precious smell that always came with the first rain showers and faded away quickly. He lingered briefly on the stairway, drew

a few long breaths, and heard the joyous laughs of women somewhere in the house. Upstairs, he saw his niece frantically running about the porch, pulling down the wet laundry from the clothesline, dragging the cots about, and laughing. His sister, who had been sitting in the porch talking with a neighbor woman, quickly stood up, uttering a benedictory *bismillah*, as she saw him enter. The other woman turned around and looked at him with marked interest. But he crossed the porch and headed back to his room, his hands still stuffed in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. Then, just before crossing the threshold of his room, he froze.

His heart leaped violently, came halfway down, and remained, as it were, suspended in mid-air. He couldn't even turn around and look back; his head hung low as he stood there at the door immobile, remembering, as the fat raindrops plopped down on his hat.

Nuri!—the canyons of his mind resonated—Nuri!

He began to breathe deeply, but couldn't retrieve that priceless fragrance that emanated from the walls with the first showers. It was gone. Very slowly he turned around and planted himself in full view of the portly middle-aged woman sitting on a cot on the porch.

"Nuri!" his lips moved but remained voiceless. The woman stared at him with a smile at once of recoiling modesty and welcoming familiarity. Rooted to the spot, he stared back at her as the raindrops tumbled over his blank, expressionless face like moments: drip-drop, drip-drop.

"Saeed!" his sister's voice rose, "it's raining."

He turned around as if in sleep, crossed the threshold, and stood in the center of the room. His son was comfortably settled in a chair, hands spread out on the armrests, staring blankly into the rain. He remained standing, immobile, his hands still in his pockets, as occasional drops of rain rolled over the brim of his hat and dripped from his shoulders and sleeves onto the floor: drip-drop, drip-drop. He was only eleven years old then, and this portly woman a lithe girl whose swaying body recalled the winding, upward motion and grace of a delicate vine. An impatient energy informed all her movements: she seemed scarcely to walk, but rather always to be running, thumping up and down the stairs and out into the lane; her skin was the color of honey. The only solace of an eleven-year-old heart!—he smiled distractedly and felt his heart return to its place. He breathed easily and lightly again. She was much older than he and wouldn't give him the time of day, of course. Still, for long hours, he would wait—glued to the door of his room or standing on the porch, in the window, in the street, at his house or at hers, anywhere and everywhere—to catch a glimpse of her, only to feel infinitely sad if he

succeeded. This young woman exerted on that eleven-year-old boy a rich golden magic no one else could work, not his mother, his sister, his father, or anyone. Every day, month, and year, how he had waited for a glimpse of her, he remembered, and how she had remained oblivious of him the whole time, as if he didn't exist. Finally, when he had left home, he seemed to have brought her along—that golden image of the blossoming girl propelled with youthful energy; the first woman to steal his heart, whom he was never able to quite forget. He laughed again, as if trying to think away an unseen clap of thunder.

Afterwards, many women had entered his life and gone out of it. Their fascination, too, disappeared with time, but not the fascination of that girl. It had endured. One image remained unalterably fixed in a corner of his heart. Its quiet rays guided him like a beacon, propelling him toward the next love after the last one had ended, keeping him eternally young with its endless reserves of warmth. He had never imagined in his wildest dreams that he would once again find himself face to face with his first love, and least of all in the present manner.

It was like a rock flying out of nowhere and striking a windowpane, causing the glass to crack into a web of lines but leaving the pane intact in its frame, each splinter reflecting a broken image: an eye here, a nose there, an ear here, a lip there—a frightening picture!

Still standing rooted in place, he craned his neck back to look out through the door. The cot was empty; there was only his sister, carrying a chair which she set down beside him.

"Nuri," he heard her say, "—you recognized her, didn't you? Poor woman, her husband ..."

He threw himself into the chair, unbuttoned his collar, and ran his fingers slowly over his chest, as if trying to trace the lines of splintered glass. Outside, the rain pelted down relentlessly, washing away the names and signs children had scribbled on the walls in chalk or clay. Just then, inexplicably, he suddenly remembered the splendid rooster—a bright golden-red one, wasn't it?—that they had slaughtered during a picnic at the beach. They had just killed the bird and laid it down when it suddenly sprang up and ran away, its throat slit, its half-severed head dangling to one side and bouncing like a flap of fringe as it violently fluttered away with its wings fanned out. Everyone took off after the rooster, but it fell into the river. The river was quite deep at that spot, and those of their party who could swim had all gone to fetch firewood. The rooster floated farther and farther downstream with the current. Their mouths gaping in disbelief, they gawked at the receding bird for a long moment

like a pack of simpering fools, and afterwards laughed themselves silly as they puzzled over how the rooster, motionless once it had plopped into the river, had managed to spring up and sprint off.

All these years after the picnic, the memory of the rooster had come back to him once again. But this time he didn't find anything amusing in the scene. If anything, it appeared exceedingly tragic, and it saddened him greatly. And he asked himself with mild surprise, Where is the shoreline of these things that can take lifetimes to unearth?

He laughed again, but blankly, like the frightened laugh of a child walking, step by timid step, toward a pet animal. He got up again with a start.

Meanwhile his son had dozed off in the chair, his head lolling to one side. He was breathing deeply, his arms still on the armrests. Outside it was raining hard. The spell was breaking.

He pushed the brim of his hat high on his forehead, lowered his upturned collar, picked up the raincoat from the peg and slipped it on.

"Where to now?" his sister asked.

"I'm going out."

"But Saeed, it's raining."

"I'll be back soon. Don't you worry."

"Saeed," she raised her entreating eyes and asked timidly, "you've come to stay, haven't you?"

"Yes." He looked at his motherless child absentmindedly and walked toward the door. Then, suddenly remembering something, he turned around and looked boldly into his sister's eyes and laughed. "Yes," he said, "I've come to stay." He crossed the porch and began climbing down the stairs.

In the anteroom he met up with his niece, who had just stepped inside the house. She was drenched in rain, carrying an empty pot in one hand and holding the bottoms of her *shalwar*-trousers in the other. He gently pinched her nose and asked, "Where did you run off to, tabby cat?"

The girl twisted her body sharply and laughed, with a feeling of perfect closeness for the first time, and then said, "I just stepped out for a minute, Uncle."

He briefly stopped in the doorway, took off his hat and meticulously positioned it far back on his head. Then he stuck out his hand to feel the strength of the rain. A young boy leaning against the door of the house across from theirs, was staring at him with eager but immensely sad eyes. The doors of the other houses in the neighborhood were partly or entirely

closed. Not a soul could be seen far and wide, except for a few birds that chirruped drowsily as they huddled under the eaves to get out of the rain. An unconscious smile broke on his lips as he stepped into the street paved with red bricks. With the unhurried gait of a cheerful man, he picked his way to the bazaar with the intention to seek out and visit with his old acquaintances. The streets and neighborhoods were almost empty in the pelting rain. Daylight was slowly ebbing away. Something—exceedingly delicate but ancient and powerful—had finally snapped and come loose inside him and was circulating freely in his blood. It had taken a lifetime to finally subdue his heart. During that time he had somehow managed to live. Today, he was neither happy about it nor angry; he simply felt the beat of countless raindrops falling on his face. In his heart he knew that the raindrops had neither color nor tone—only vitality and life. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon

Glossary

Bibi (*bibī*): lady; a term of respect for older women and of affection for younger ones.

bismillah (*bi'ismi 'l-Lāh*): “In the name of God,” part of a formula used by Muslims before commencing an act.

chapati (*čapāṭī*): thin, round bread, baked on a convex iron griddle.

Eid (*'īd*): stands for either of the two major Muslim festivals, *'Īd al-aẓḥā* or *'Īd al-fīṭr*.

jaman (*jāman*): a deep purple, almost black, fruit about the size of an Italian plum; slightly tart in taste.

Khaksars (*khāksār*): members of the Khaksar Movement—a puritanical movement that arose during the 1930s among Indian Muslims and drew its membership mainly from the upper sections of the workers and lower sections of the petty bourgeoisie.

rakhi (*rākḥī*): a thread bound round the wrist of another as an amulet of protection on the Hindu festival of Saluno.

Shalwar (*shalvār*): woman's trousers; relatively narrow at the bottoms but quite loose and baggy in the middle.